

What was Known in the Neutral Countries about the On-Going Genocide of European Jews?

This essay seeks to understand, from a comparative perspective, when and through what channels countries such as Switzerland, Sweden, Spain, Portugal and Turkey learned that the Third Reich was implementing its policy of annihilating the Jews of Europe. The neutral and allied countries were well informed about antisemitic persecution conducted by the Nazi regime from its very beginning. Even in countries where censorship existed, newspapers published reports about the growing antisemitism in Germany. From late autumn 1941, Germany's goal was to exterminate all the Jews on the continent. Yet it was a long time before this was understood by the Allies and the neutral states. It is important to keep in mind that no historical precedent existed. A genocide of such magnitude in the heart of Europe was simply inconceivable and, as Deborah Lipstadt puts it, "beyond belief."¹ Furthermore, as Yehuda Bauer and Walter Laqueur maintain, there is a distinction between "information" and "knowledge,"² between "knowing" and "believing."³ More than a year and a half passed after the mass murder had begun, with the invasion of the Soviet Union, until the release of the Allied Joint Declaration of December, 1942.

Only after May—June 1942, in the face of a flood of reports that served to confirm the crimes committed by the Germans against the Jews, did a campaign start that was to "attract public attention to the crimes in Poland."⁴

1 D. Lipstadt. *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933–1945*. New York: Free Press, 1986.

2 Y. Bauer. *Rethinking the Holocaust*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. 218.

3 W. Laqueur. *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler's 'Final Solution'*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1980. 3.

4 D. Stola. "Early News of the Holocaust from Poland," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 11, No. 1 (1997): 5–7.

In June 1942, the arrival of information intensified. That month, the report of the *Bund*—originally the “General Jewish Labor Bund of Lithuania, Poland and Russia”, (an important Jewish organization in Poland that continued to operate clandestinely in the occupied territories during the war), found its way to London and Washington. On 9 June, Wladislaw Sikorski, the prime minister of the Polish government-in-exile in London, gave a speech in which he referred to the shootings, the forced transportation of Polish men and women and the Nazis’ objective of exterminating all the Jews. On 29 June, the British section of the World Jewish Congress organized a press conference at which Ignacy Schwarzbart, a Jewish representative on the National Council of the Polish government-in-exile, stated that a million Jews had already been murdered. On 8 July, 1942, the Polish National Council issued a resolution that spoke of plans to eliminate all the Jews.

However, these first alarms about mass extermination were not generally believed. There was a widespread belief that both the Poles and the Jewish organizations were exaggerating, because, among other reasons, during World War I, British propaganda had spread extensive rumors about the Germans, most of which were later discredited. The “campaign” continued and, in November 1942, the Jewish Agency executive issued an official statement confirming the extermination of Jews in Europe. That same month, Jan Karski, who worked as a courier for the Polish government-in-exile, arrived in London and delivered a report. On 10 December, the Poles sent a diplomatic memo to the governments of the United Nations. This document dealt exclusively with the extermination of the Jews, making it “a visible exception” to the tendency of seeing this practice as ‘just another’ Nazi atrocity committed in Poland. Then, on 17 December, 1942, the Allied Powers issued a public statement that denounced and condemned “the bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination” of the Jews.

The Joint Declaration on the Persecution of the Jews from 17 December, 1942, in which the eleven Allied governments presented their common position, stated explicitly that the German authorities were engaging in the mass murder of European Jews and that those responsible for this “bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination” would “not escape retribution.”

However, the existence of an extermination camp with details about the gas chambers was revealed only in the spring of 1944, following the escape of prisoners from Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Polish government-in-exile also played a leading role in informing the neutral countries. Its

Joint Declaration
Announced Simultaneously on December 17th, 1942, in
London, Moscow and Washington

"The attention of the Governments of Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the United States of America, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, and Yugoslavia, and of the French National Committee, has been drawn to numerous reports from Europe that the German authorities, not content with denying to persons of Jewish race in all the territories over which their barbarous rule has been extended the most elementary human rights, are now carrying into effect Hitler's oft-repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe. From all the occupied countries Jews are being transported, in conditions of appalling horror and brutality, to Eastern Europe. In Poland, which has been made the principal Nazi slaughter-house, the Ghettos established by the German invaders are being systematically emptied of all Jews, except a few highly skilled workers required for war industries. None of those taken away are ever heard of again. The able-bodied are slowly worked to death in labour camps. The infirm are left to die of exposure and starvation, or are deliberately massacred in mass executions. The number of victims of these bloody cruelties is reckoned in many hundreds of thousands of entirely innocent men, women, and children.

"The above-mentioned Governments and the French National Committee condemn in the strongest possible terms this bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination. They declare that such events can only strengthen the resolve of all freedom-loving peoples to overthrow the barbarous Hitlerite tyranny. They reaffirm their solemn resolution to ensure that those responsible for these crimes shall not escape retribution, and to press on with the necessary practical measures to this end."

REPUBLIC OF POLAND

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

**THE MASS EXTERMINATION
of JEWS in
GERMAN OCCUPIED POLAND**

NOTE

**addressed to the Governments of the
United Nations on December 10th, 1942,
and other documents**



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Ministry of Foreign Affairs by*

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Information pamphlet by the Polish government-in-exile containing several documents that provide evidence of the ongoing extermination of Jews by the Germans, published and disseminated in January 1943.

representatives were in contact with neutral diplomats in London.⁵ On 11 September, 1942, Polish Foreign Minister Edward Raczynski informed the neutral countries that a large number of Polish Jews, who had been living in unoccupied France, had been deported to the Reich.⁶ Later, between December 1942 and January 1943, a pamphlet entitled “*The Mass Extermination of Jews in German Occupied Poland*,” published on behalf of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reached the neutral capitals.⁷

In addition to the information provided by the government-in-exile and Jewish organizations, each neutral country had its own sources of information. Countries such as Sweden, Switzerland, Spain and Portugal were in a better situation than the Allies to receive information because they kept their diplomatic representations open in the Reich and other Axis countries during the war. Thus, their citizens, journalists, military personnel, businessmen, etc., could travel to Germany and the occupied territories. They even sent military and medical missions to the Eastern Front. Spain, for example, sent a division of (alleged) volunteers (the Blue Division). Furthermore, it was through these countries that many Jews, fleeing Hitler and the Holocaust, could escape, bringing with them descriptions of the persecution they had endured. The governments and diplomats of the neutral countries, however, were also unable to fully comprehend the dimensions of the Nazi extermination plans.

Switzerland⁸

Of all the neutral countries, Switzerland was best positioned to receive news. Its territory was an important link in the Polish intelligence network, whose couriers managed to deliver messages there that were then sent on

5 AHDMNE (Historical and Diplomatic Archives of the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Lisbon, hereafter AHDMNE), 2.º P., A.49, M. 96, Note Verbale. 18.6.1942.

6 D. Engel. “The Polish Government-in-Exile and the Deportation of Polish Jews from France in 1942.” *Yad Vashem Studies* 15 (1983): 15–16.

7 AHDMNE, Lisbon, 2.º P., A.49, M. 96, Official letter from the Polish Minister to António de Oliveira Salazar. 15.1.1943.

8 The author thanks R. Fivaz-Silbermann for help regarding the case of Switzerland.

to London.⁹ One such message was a report sent by the Swiss minister in Rome, after a conversation with Cardinal Maglione, to Marcel Pilet-Golaz, head of the Swiss Foreign Ministry. In it he spoke of the “biological extermination of a large part of the population in the occupied regions.”

Swiss consuls sent back reports about the deportation of Jews, especially Franz von Weiss, the Swiss consul in Cologne. In November 1941, von Weiss wrote to the Swiss minister in Berlin, informing him that, according to information provided by an important German industrialist, Jews were starving to death in the ghettos of Warsaw and Lodz. The legation forwarded the document to Berne, but Pilet-Golaz considered it confidential, meaning it should not circulate within the Foreign Ministry.¹⁰

Eye-witness accounts from several Swiss citizens who had travelled to the East, including some on medical missions, and who had been present at executions of Jews carried out by the *Einsatzgruppen* (Mobile Killing Units) also came to the attention of Swiss diplomats.

One such account was by Rudolf Bucher, a doctor, who was in the region of Smolensk and Minsk in October 1941 and who, on his return to Switzerland in January 1942, tried to make this information public. The army’s intelligence service also interrogated deserters and some former combatants in Russia, who spoke about the massacres of Jews committed by the *Einsatzgruppen*. Thanks to the accumulation of information, especially that provided by the Polish legation in Berne, in September 1943, Heinrich Rothmund, the Swiss police chief, for the first time was able to distinguish the differences between concentration camps and extermination camps.¹¹

Did Swiss authorities understand that the Third Reich had implemented a policy of annihilation of European Jewry? Most likely they had information about such an objective, but not the knowledge to understand it. In July 1942, in a report requested by Heinrich Rothmund, his deputy Robert Jezler noted that, “the consistent and reliable reports about how the deportations are being carried out and the conditions in the Jewish quar-

9 W. Laqueur. *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler’s ‘Final Solution’*. Boston: 1980. 41–42; C. Ludwig. *Die Flüchtlingspolitik der Schweiz seit 1933 bis zur Gegenwart*. Bern: Lang, 1957.

10 M. Cerutti. “La Suisse, terre d’asile?” *Revue d’Histoire de la SHOAH – Le monde juif*, No. 163 (1998): 33.

11 M. Cerutti. “La Suisse, terre d’asile?” 36.

ters in the east are so awful that one cannot help but understand the desperate attempts made by the refugees to escape from such a fate.”¹² The reports only mentioned the deportations from the Reich that were not understood as part of a wider policy of annihilation. Moreover, important information that circulated within Swiss territory was transmitted abroad through private channels, and did not reach the government. This happened with Gerhart Riegner, the World Jewish Congress representative in Geneva. He forwarded important details obtained from German industrialist Edward Schulze to London and Washington.¹³

The Swiss press was also well informed about the segregation and persecution of Jews. However, after the war began, censorship was imposed that also functioned *a posteriori*. This mechanism worked to avoid publication of news that could lead to protests from the belligerent countries.

Sweden

In August 1942, Karl Vendel, the Swedish consul in Stettin, wrote a report recounting conversations he had had on a visit to occupied Poland in which he said that the Nazis’ objective was to annihilate all Jews, and that even those who were kept alive to fill labor shortages would be exterminated as soon as they were deemed no longer useful. At the end of the report, Vendel made a point of emphasizing that his source, of German origin, was reliable so that no doubts could be raised about the credibility of the information. This was one of the first revelations about the extermination of the Jews to become known in the West, and preceded both Karski’s report and the Riegner Cable.¹⁴

Another Swedish diplomat, Göran von Otter, revealed important information received from SS officer Kurt Gerstein, which was then trans-

- 12 Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland—Second World War. Switzerland. *National Socialism and the Second World War. Final Report*. Zurich: Pendo, 2002. 113.
- 13 W. Laqueur. “The Terrible Secret: Some Afterthoughts.” In C. Y. Freeze, S.F. Fried, E.R. Sheppard (eds.). *The Individual in History: Essays in Honor of Jehuda Reinharz*. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2015. 409–413.
- 14 J. Lewandowski. “Early Swedish Information about the Nazis’ Mass Murder of the Jews.” *Polin* 13 (2000): 113–127.

mitted to the head of the Swedish Foreign Ministry's political department. Gerstein was returning from an inspection of the Belzec extermination camp where he had witnessed the killing of Jews in the gas chambers. Soon after, he met von Otter by chance on a train from Warsaw to Berlin. This was the moment he passed on information to send back to Swedish authorities in Stockholm, asking that it be forwarded to the Allies. However, as Paul Levine has argued, we still do not know when and how von Otter passed the information to the Foreign Ministry. Furthermore, as Levine demonstrated, the Swedish government did not forward the information to the Allies.

The Swedish press also published news based on reports, but did so sporadically since the government's "Board of Information" advised newspaper editors not to publish anything on inopportune topics—such as atrocities committed by the belligerent parties—because this could be seen as a provocation with dangerous consequences for Sweden. Thus, it was only when the deportation of Jews ordered by Quisling's collaborationist government in Norway caused a "great commotion," leading the press and Lutheran bishops to react indignantly. For Levine, "this first shift" was "a response to the tragedy of the tiny population of the fellow Nordic nation Norway," when the Germans were already surrounded at Stalingrad, and Rommel had been defeated in North Africa.¹⁵

Spain

Unlike Sweden or Switzerland, Spain had combatants fighting on the Eastern Front. The regime was informed by soldiers from the Blue Division about the bloody repression to which Poles and Russians were subjected. These soldiers saw first-hand how the local population was discriminated against. However, they did not actually witness any massacres since *Einsatzgruppe A* had already carried out the "cleansing" of areas where the Spanish were fighting.

15 P.A. Levine. "Attitudes and Action: Comparing the Responses of Mid-Level Bureaucrats to the Holocaust." in D. Cesarani and P.A. Levine (eds.), *Bystanders to the Holocaust: A Re-Evaluation*. London: Frank Cass, 2002. 226; W. Laqueur. "The Terrible Secret: Some Afterthoughts." 52.

Furthermore, Spaniards could travel to the occupied territories, as a delegation of doctors did when they visited Austria and Poland in late 1941. As a result of this trip, a secret document was sent to Spain's Interior Ministry that described the incarceration and killing of Jews in ghettos. This report probably ended up in the hands of Francisco Franco. In August 1942, the dictator was also informed by the general-directorate of security of the deportations from France to Eastern Europe. In July 1943, a Spanish lawyer in Madrid made public the rumors he had heard in Berlin about how Jews were being deported and later gassed. This information came to the knowledge of the British Embassy in Madrid, which passed it on to the Foreign Office in London.¹⁶

Spain was also informed by its diplomatic representatives of the on-going antisemitic persecutions. In the case of Spain, the German ultimatum of January 1943 allows us to assess how much Spain actually knew about the Nazi genocide policy.¹⁷ In July 1943, the first secretary of the Spanish Embassy in Berlin spoke with German diplomat Eberhard von Thadden about the Spanish Jews in Salonika. The diplomat told von Thadden, who was responsible for implementing antisemitic policy at Germany's Foreign Ministry (*Auswärtiges Amt*), that Spain could in no way agree to having its subjects murdered in Polish camps. The German denied the accusation, saying the information about the atrocities was defamatory propaganda generated by Germany's enemies. Also in July, the Spanish ambassador informed the Foreign Ministry of the "tragic consequences" of any eventual deportation of Spanish Jews. With his consent, a member of the embassy staff wrote a letter to a friend, the director-general of foreign policy at the Foreign Ministry, saying that should Spain refuse to receive the Jews, it would be condemning them "automatically to death."¹⁸

As for the press, unlike proceedings in Sweden or Switzerland, it was only at the end of 1945 that *ABC*, a Spanish newspaper, was able to publish news about the Nazi camps.¹⁹

16 B. Rother. *Franco y el Holocausto*. Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2005. 125–126.

17 See the essay of Bernd Rother in this volume for discussions of this issue.

18 B. Rother. *Franco y el Holocausto*. 127.

19 X.M. Núñez Seixas. "Testigos o Encubridores? La División Azul y el Holocausto de los Judíos Europeos: Entre Historia y Memoria." in *Historia y Política* No. 26 (2011): 265.

Portugal

In Portugal, which had been under a dictatorial regime since 1926, the press was subject to censorship. With the outbreak of war this control increased significantly. News reports about the barbarities committed by the Germans were eliminated on the pretext that they would compromise the country's official position. The censors even questioned whether the information on the existence of concentration camps and the execution of Jews, Poles and Catholics by firing squads was not just propaganda and rumors.²⁰ These initial doubts were soon dispelled, but later the cuts were justified not because the information was considered imaginary, but because the news contained "inconvenient" details, so that information about German concentration and extermination camps continued to be censored.²¹ From Bucharest, the Portuguese minister, Fernando Quartin de Oliveira Bastos, who had held on-going talks with the papal nuncio, kept Salazar up to date about the persecution set in motion by the Ion Antonescu regime. He even refers to "the murders that are being systematically committed in this country of the Jews," and to "the pillaging and extermination of the Jews in occupied Russian territory."²² However, the Polish government-in-exile, especially through its legation in Lisbon, was the most important source of information for the Portuguese government. It sent the Portuguese government Sikorski's speech from 9 June, 1942.²³ On 22 September, the Polish legation in Lisbon handed a verbal note to the Portuguese government about the deportation of Polish Jews living in unoccupied France to the Reich.

20 See, for example, the article "...Piores entradas" [Bad Start to the Year]- based on Polish reports, which the newspaper *A Voz* sought to publish (Oliveira Salazar Archive, Lisbon (Arquivo de Oliveira Salazar, DGARQ/AOS), CO/NE2, pt.47, "Informações—Alemanha." *A Voz* de 1-1ª").

21 Oliveira Salazar Archive, Lisbon, DGARQ, AOS/CO/PC-3E, pasta 28. Letter from M. Figueiredo to António de Oliveira Salazar about the censorship of news regarding the concentration camps in Germany. 21 April 1945.

22 Telegrama No. 86. Do Ministro de Portugal em Bucareste ao Ministro dos Negócios Estrangeiro, 6 Nov. 1941. Doc.2520, *Dez Anos de Política Externa (1936–1947). A Nação Portuguesa e a Segunda Guerra Mundial* Vol. X (1974): 21–22.

23 All the Polish documents mentioned hereafter can be found in the Historical and Diplomatic Archives of the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Lisbon (AHDMNE), Lisbon, 2.º P. Armário 49, Maço 96.

At the end of 1942, the Palestine-based “Representation of Polish Jewry” sent a telegram about the situation of the Polish Jews to the president of the Portuguese Republic. According to this document, thousands of Jews had already been killed by the Germans, who did not even spare women or children. They appealed to the president to “employ all [his] authority and influence to put an end to those unprecedented crimes and to open the gates of free countries to those who seek refuge from that inferno on earth.” In January 1943, the pamphlet *“The Mass Extermination of Jews in German Occupied Poland”* finally reached the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Portuguese regime did not allow the information it received to be made public, nor did it react to the countless official letters and appeals from the Polish government-in-exile. The verbal note of September 1942 was, in fact, the only occasion on which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs took a position—not in an attempt to save the Jews, but as a way of showing their goodwill regarding the appeal. However, Portugal’s reaction was no different from the standard reaction demonstrated by both the other neutral countries and the Allies.

Turkey²⁴

The Polish underground resistance, as well as representatives of the Polish government-in-exile, also operated in Turkey. The Polish consulate in Istanbul, which was subordinate to the government-in-exile, published two papers in which the murder of Jews was reported several times. We can also assume that it sent the Turkish government Sikorski’s speech and the pamphlet “The Mass Extermination of Jews” as it did to the other neutral governments. However, neutral Turkey was an important escape route for Jews fleeing Nazi oppression in Eastern and Southeastern Europe and, as a consequence, the country became a base for rescue activities carried out by Jewish organizations. In winter 1942–1943, at the initiative of the Jewish Agency, a rescue committee was established in Istanbul. Several other international relief organizations sent their representatives to Turkey, where refugees who managed to reach the country informed them about the conditions in the concentration camps and about Nazi Germa-

24 This section is based on the research of C. Guttstadt. The author thanks her for her generous assistance, including her comments on draft versions of this essay.

ny's murder of the Jews.²⁵ According to Corry Guttstadt, because all such organizations and representatives were monitored by the police and intelligence services, the information on the extermination camps also reached Turkish intelligence, though we do not know to what degree they passed the information on to the Turkish government itself. Representatives of the Jewish Agency even tried to pressure the authorities to change their refugee policy by drawing attention to the persecution of Jews.

Additionally, some reports, particularly from American journalists accredited in Turkey, were dispatched. For example, in 1941, journalists reported from Turkey about the murder of Jews by the *Einsatzgruppen* in Romania. However, this does not mean that the Turkish population knew about such information. At that time, Turkey was a totalitarian state and information was frequently silenced by restrictive laws, and censored first by the government's press office, and, from 1941, also by the military commander of the state of emergency. The German-Turkish Treaty of Friendship and Non-Aggression of 18 June, 1941, prohibited the publication of any news hostile to Nazi Germany. During the early years of Nazi rule, the Turkish press expressed understanding for anti-Jewish laws, stating that this was a reaction to Jewish hegemony over Germany's society and economy. This silence by the Turkish press was a consequence of German pressure, but also of indifference to the fate of the Jews. As a result, information about German atrocities was eliminated on the pretext that it would compromise Turkey's neutrality. The December 1942 issue of the government journal *Ayin Tarihi*, ("The History of the Month"), reported in January 1943 on the inter-Allied declaration, publishing verbatim the speech by British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden on the destruction of European Jews by Nazi Germany. This is the most important evidence showing that, in the spring of 1943, Turkey's government knew about "the destruction of the Jews in Poland."²⁶ From Bucharest, the Turkish ambassador, Hamdullah Suphi Tanrıöver, reported on the dangers faced by the Jews in Romania. In other European countries, diplomats received requests for help from Turkish Jews who were targets of Nazi antisemitic persecution. Some of these were sent directly to the president or to Turkey's Parliament.²⁷ How-

25 T. Kollek. *For Jerusalem: A Life*. New York: Random House, 1978. 45–47.

26 *Ayin Tarihi* No. 109, December 1942: 309.

27 C. Guttstadt. *Turkey, the Jews, and the Holocaust*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2013. 200ff, 268.

ever, until the declassification and public disclosure of official Turkish documents, it is impossible to know exactly when and how information on Germany's genocidal policy reached the Turkish government.

In fact, this comparative analysis allows us to draw some important conclusions about the behavior of the neutral countries in light of what they knew about the Holocaust at the time. The amount of information initially available was limited and was viewed with great skepticism. Sufficient information from different sources had to be accumulated in order for the doubts to turn into certainties. Yet even then, owing to the official neutrality declared by these countries, "inconvenient" and "sensitive" matters were avoided. Moreover, the mere fact that some diplomats and citizens from the neutral countries realized the dimension of German crimes does not mean that their governments believed their reports. Again, available information was not always fully comprehended or transformed into knowledge, regardless of whether the country was a democracy or dictatorship. In the case of Switzerland and Sweden, there were fears of triggering a negative German reaction. When they began receiving information about the murders, there was no guarantee that Germany would lose the war, and there remained the real possibility of invasion. Priority was given to maintaining cordial relations with all the countries at war, thereby guaranteeing their neutrality. They were also not interested in transforming their countries into lands of refuge by opening their borders and allowing thousands of refugees to enter, people who could not return to their countries of origin. Feelings of sympathy for the persecuted minority rarely emerged among the non-belligerent governments, not even a feeling of solidarity. On the contrary, immigration policies became tougher with major obstacles being put in place to prevent people from obtaining visas in order to stop refugees from entering their territories. In reality, political leaders felt no empathy with the Jews and, in some cases, antisemitic prejudice among some mid-level bureaucrats was evident even when antisemitism was not a key element in the regimes' political ideologies. For dictatorial governments like those of Franco or Salazar, it was unthinkable to embrace a humanitarian mission for individuals who were not national citizens but foreigners, and for whom they had no legal responsibility whatsoever. The indifference towards the murderous drama taking place beyond their borders was generalized, something which only changed at the end of the war, when the outcome was definitively decided.